

INSIDE TRACKS

Thompson Falls sheep herd reduced by road deaths

Motorists continue to kill bighorn sheep in vehicle/sheep collisions along Montana 200 near Thompson Falls, further reducing one of Montana's biggest and most watchable sheep herds. The problem extends for about nine miles along the narrow Clark Fork Valley, but most sheep are killed on two, 1 1/2 mile sections during the winter and early spring.

This year, two ewes and a trophy ram had already been killed by mid-December. During the winter and spring, 1990/91, 35 sheep were mowed down by vehicles and trains.

According to Bruce Sterling, Department wildlife biologist in Thompson Falls, the bighorns abandon their range in the hills above the valley during the day and feed on grasses along the highway and railroad tracks.

"Many people think that the sheep come down to drink from the Clark Fork River," said Sterling. "That's not true. The sheep are just not using the winter range in the hills."

Sterling said that the worst period is December through March. "I've counted over 200 sheep along the highway in a few minutes," said Sterling. "That's about two-thirds of the entire herd. Many of them feed within a few feet of the cars

and trucks going by at 65 or 70 m.p.h."

More sheep have been killed by vehicles in the Badrock area, near milepost 65, than at any other point along the road. "It's a blind corner with no sight distance," said Sterling. "The sheep feed between the railroad tracks and the highway, along a strip of grass 10 feet wide. The cliffs extend to the road edge on the north side. Once, a big chip truck wiped out four sheep in one collision."

Most of the sheep killed are ewes. The ewes are usually pregnant, so the death of a ewe removes two sheep from

"It's a miserable thing to sit here, watch these sheep die, and not be able to do anything about it."

the population.

"Sportsmen pay in the end," said Sterling. "We have to cut back on hunting quotas to compensate for the sheep killed on the highway. Last year vehicles killed more sheep than were killed by hunters."

Sterling cited eight measures which could reduce the mortality problem:

1. Install four warning signs, two in each direction. This has been done, but appears to be ineffective to date.

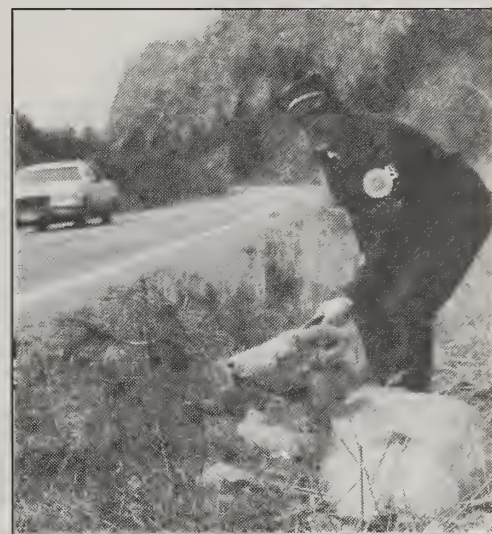
2. Install flashing warning lights.

3. Reduce the speed limit along the two, 1 1/2 mile sections of highway where most mortalities occur.

4. Conduct a study to determine why the sheep are not using the traditional winter range in the hills, and to suggest ways of improving the winter range.

5. Conduct a hazing program during the winter/spring. This would involve firing cracker shells at the sheep along the highway for negative conditioning.

6. Spray herbicides to kill the vegetation which the sheep are feeding on along the highway.



UNFORTUNATE ROAD KILL. Biologist Bruce Sterling checks a bighorn ewe killed by a motorist on Montana 200 near Thompson Falls. Last year vehicles killed more sheep than hunters did.

7. Install fencing along major sections of the highway.

8. Reconstruct the highway to straighten it and increase sight distances.

"The warning signs just don't seem to be working," said Sterling. "I've suggested warning lights and reduced speed limits, but the Highway Department does not feel it's warranted at this time."

Sterling feels that in the short run, a combination of flashing yellow lights and reduced speed limits would greatly reduce the sheep deaths. He believes that the study to suggest ways of improving the sheep's traditional winter range would be valuable.

Fencing and spraying the roadside vegetation are more extreme measures that might eventually be required. Highway reconstruction appears to be at least ten years away.

"It's a miserable thing to sit here, watch these sheep die, and not be able to do anything about it," said Sterling. "I know we'll always lose some sheep. I'm just trying to get the mortality down to a point where it's manageable." ■

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Interview: FWP Commission Chairman Errol Galt

Errol Galt was appointed chairman of the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission by Governor Stephens in January, 1989. He has proved to be a commanding presence on the Commission, and has gained many supporters and few critics. His success is probably related to his personal style and perhaps even his physical appearance (he's 6'4", but he seems much taller).

The shift from full-time rancher to full-time rancher/Commissioner has been mostly positive for Martinsdale resident Galt, his wife Sharrie, and children Wylie, 7, Brock, 6, and Jocelyn, 2.

"It's been busy, but then it's always been busy around here," said Sharrie Galt. "It's been fun to see him do something he really enjoys, something new. We've seen another part of him we didn't know was there."

Commissioner Galt granted us an interview at the conclusion of the December 13/14 Commission meeting in Helena.

Angler advisory group helps guide fisheries program

During the past year, the fisheries program of the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks and Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribe has gotten a boost from the Flathead Angler Advisory Group. The group consists of 22 anglers who are interested in the fisheries of the area. The members represent major angling and sportsman groups, merchants, outfitters, and anglers at large.

The group has met about every other month to discuss issues ranging from fishing regulations on specific waters to long-range planning on how to improve the relationship of the Department and public.

"This advisory group has accomplished a lot in less than a year," said Region One Fisheries Manager Jim Vashro. "They've gotten into the guts of the fisheries program."

"We finally have a medium for the angler-at-large to communicate views to the Department."

The group has dealt with a number of issues including: tentative fishing regulations for the 1992-1994 seasons, reconstruction of the Old Steel Bridge Fishing Access Site, regional fish planting program, the "Mac Attack" fishing derby, interaction of the state and tribal fisheries programs, angler preference surveys, emergency lake trout limit in the Flathead Drainage, smallmouth bass intro-

ductions, fisheries concerns at Echo Lake, aquatic education programs, and general agency management direction.

Members of the advisory group are positive about the function of the group to date. "The interchange between members has been great," said Ken Kettinger, President of the Flathead Fishing Association. "I feel that we are accomplishing something. We don't want to spend our time and energy unless we see positive things happen without our input. We're chomping at the bit to do more."

According to group member Frank Danner, the group will result in much-improved communication in the region. "We finally have a medium for the angler-at-large to communicate views to the Department," said Danner. "The biggest problem in the region was that anglers were not telling the Department what they expected. Hopefully, this advisory group will be the vehicle to correct it."

Group member Nick Haren of the Kalispell Chamber of Commerce would like to see the function of the group expanded. "I'd like to see us get into a community education effort, similar to the Chamber's ambassador program. That way, the group could serve as a conduit for information back to the community."

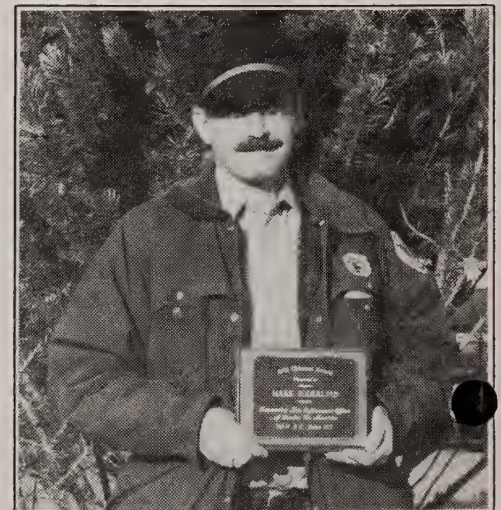
The mailing list of advisory group participants includes 22 names; however about 12 usually attend a given meeting. The Department would welcome 3-5 more people to the group.

Interested persons should contact Jim Vashro, FWP Fisheries Manager, 752-5501 or Joe DosSantos, Tribal Fishery Manager, 675-2700. **■**

Soderlind given outstanding law enforcement officer award

Warden Mark Soderlind of Thompson Falls has received the 1991 citizens award for outstanding law enforcement officer of Sanders County. Soderlind won praise for his efforts on law enforcement, interagency cooperation, and community involvement. The Citizen Committee recognized Soderlind for his fair treatment of violators and non-violators.

Soderlind has been with the Department for 15 years. He has been stationed at Thompson Falls since 1989. **■**



Editor: *Has serving on the Commission been about like you expected?*

Galt: It has been nowhere near what I expected. I had a lot narrower perspective of the Department, as I think many others do. I also had a dimmer view of the Department. I viewed them as perhaps more obstructionist than they actually are. The professionalism of the Department employees has continued to impress me.

Editor: *What background do you bring to the Commission?*

Galt: I'm a rancher, and the majority of my interests are in agriculture. All my ties go back to agriculture; it's been my livelihood and my life. I've always enjoyed fishing, especially deep-sea fishing, and I'm an avid bird hunter. I've hunted big game in the past, but I rarely hunt big game now.

Editor: *Why does it seem that many ranchers lose their interest in hunting big game?*

Galt: I think that when you are around deer and elk so much in your everyday life, you take them for granted and lose the spark of wanting to hunt them. Dealing with hunters probably has some effect too. You begin to dread hunting season in a way because of all the pressure of hunters on your place. I'm not saying that's bad of course; I fully support the tool of hunting in managing our big game herds, but it means a lot of work for private landowners.

Editor: *At the December Commission meeting in Helena, you considered the Department's draft, statewide elk plan. What is the status of the plan?*

Galt: The way I see it, the Commission and the Department will get together and go through the plan page by page. The concepts in the elk plan are outstanding; there is some language that needs to be cleaned up. I can't see us making major changes. My personal view is that we need to substitute some more positive language in places, which will make it a better document.

Editor: *Will the entire document have to be re-issued to the 4,000 people who received the current draft?*

Galt: I would like to see us issue only the three or four pages of changes to the reviewers, who could then incorporate that into the plan they already have. We could do that before the end of January, then take another 30 days of comment and finalize the plan in March or April.

Editor: *Would the entire plan be re-opened for public comment, or only the changes?*

Galt: I'm not sure at this point, although I'd like to see it limited to only the changed portions of the plan. That's something we will have to discuss. Obviously, if someone comments on something else, you have to listen.

Editor: *Citizen comment at the Commission meetings can sometimes have a significant effect on decisions. Are you comfortable with the Commission process as it now operates?*

Galt: I believe the Commission process works very well. If people are well-prepared and approach us in a professional, upbeat manner, we listen. However, people who come in and tell us we're a bunch of jerks and offer no constructive criticism are not going to get anywhere.

The process may have the appearance that people who show up at our meetings influence us. That's not just appearance; it's reality. In our role as liaisons between the public and Department, that's the way it's supposed to work.

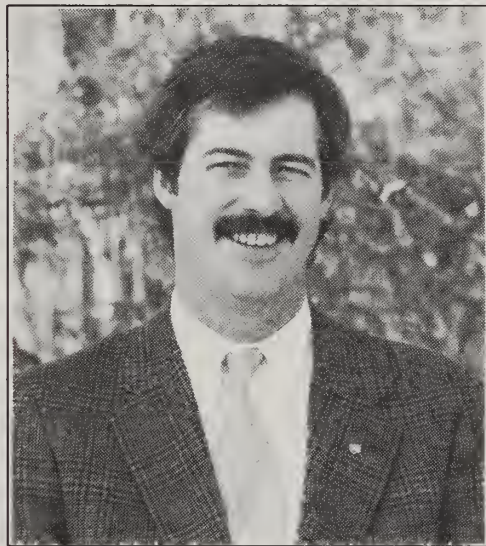
Editor: *Could you describe the resolution that the Commission passed regarding Constitutional Initiative 62, the "right-to-hunt" initiative?*

Galt: The language of the resolution was very involved, but basically it said while we support the concept of protecting our hunting heritage, we can't support hunting as a constitutional right. The constitutional right to hunt is one issue in CI 62, but there were other issues involved that had no business at all in the initiative.

According to our legal advice, the initiative could remove our ability to regulate non-resident hunters, to set harvest levels of wildlife, and generally erode our ability to provide a quality experience for the sportsmen and sportswomen of Montana.

It's also a strong possibility that the Department could lose half of its funding base. We feel as strongly as anyone about the security of our hunting heritage, but I can't see the advantage in establishing it as a constitutional right.

Editor: *How have your wife and kids been taking your stint as Commission chairman?*



Galt: As well as could be expected, I suppose. I've spent a lot of time away from home over the past three years. I never dreamed it would take the amount of time it has. Before becoming a Commissioner, there were very few nights that I wasn't home with them because of the situation we

have on the ranch. It's been an adjustment, but we're getting through it pretty well.

Editor: *Has your relationship with members of the agricultural community changed at all since you became a Commissioner?*

Galt: Four years ago I was president of the local stockgrowers association. Within six months of my Commission appointment a lot of the ties to the stockgrowers were not recognized any longer. Some of them approached me with distrust because I'm part of an organization that deals with wildlife management.

I have no problem with it at all. My views are close to what they were before, but I've learned a lot of good things about the Department that I didn't know before.

Editor: *What has been the high point of your time on the Commission?*

Galt: I don't think I could pick one high point; there have been many, and very few low points. The education I've gone through, the traveling and meeting people around the state—I'd have to say it's been three years of high points. I hope that the next year will be as exciting and upbeat as the first three. **■**

Advisory groups are here to stay

I am a strong supporter and promoter of citizen advisory groups. In this day and age, resource agencies like Fish, Wildlife and Parks can use all the help we can get in solving the complicated issues we face.

Interaction with the public is a very necessary ingredient to successful resource management. Hans Bleiker, in his "Citizen Participation Handbook for Public Officials" has summarized a variety

of functions which advisory groups perform. **Advisory groups can:**

1. Provide oversight to agencies who for various reasons have lost the confidence of some of the members of the public. Sometimes it becomes necessary to reestablish or build "trust" between the public and support groups.

2. Sometimes agencies are mandated to solve unpopular public sector problems. We often know that "silent and invisible constituencies" exist. Advisory committees can be called together to **show that support exists** for resource issues.

3. Advisory committees can be used to "depolarize" interests that are at "each other's throat." Often in resource issues we find a variety of opinions and solutions. Indeed, many times we find that there is more than one way to manage resources. In a well-balanced advisory committee, members often begin to appreciate the other person's point of view.

4. Advisory committees are expected to **channel information**. This means members must carry the message from his or her constituent group to the decision-making authorities. This information about the viewpoint of their con-


stituency, their concerns and fears, can be very helpful to agencies in making determinations. In return, advisory group members need to carry information about "what the agency is doing and why" back to the members.

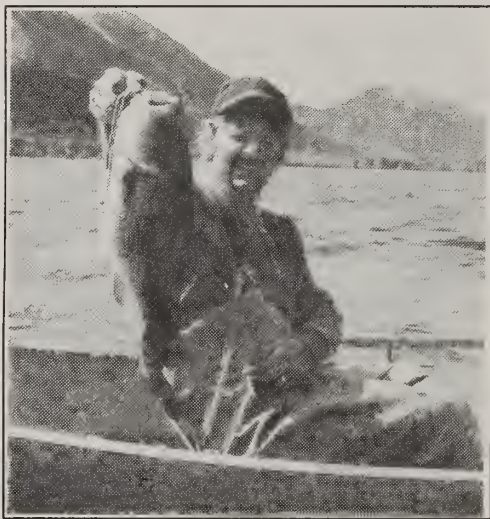
In Region One we have both formal and informal advisory committees currently in action. One such group is the Flathead Angler Advisory Group (FAAG). This committee has been meeting for several months and dealing with general fisheries issues in the region.

The group has been very helpful in sensitizing our fish managers to the needs and viewpoints of the public. In turn, it has helped defuse more than one issue by allowing members of the group to hear various perspectives.

Interaction between all participants in this group has been straightforward and honest. There has been plenty of healthy and spirited debate, and I saw no suppressed feelings of frustration.

Watching this group work has made me feel very positive and motivated as a public employee. I know people do care.

There are no edicts or policies that require Region One to develop advisory committees, nor listen to them for that matter...but you can bet we will! 



Dan Vincent, Supervisor

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